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Re-Presenting the Past in the Hindi Novel: The Darkness in Bhīṣma Sāhnī's *Tamas**

ABSTRACT: While the modern literary novel in Hindi has traditionally grappled with contemporary issues impacting society in north India, Bhīṣma Sāhnī's famous novel *Tamas* ("Darkness") may be considered a unique endeavour to revisit the horrific events that marked the transfer of power and partition of British India in 1947. This article represents a preliminary attempt to consider the emergence of a work of literary fiction in Hindi approximately 25 years after the events on which it is based.

KEYWORDS: Hindi fiction, literary novel, history, Partition, secularism, communalism in South Asia

Introduction

In 1973 the progressive Hindi novelist and short story writer, Bhīṣma Sāhnī produced what is arguably his most famous novel, *Tamas* ("Darkness"), about the calamitous events that took place in the Punjab around the partition in 1947. Sāhnī's fictional account of a riot that unfolded in an unnamed city and quickly spread to the countryside over the course of five or six days appears a unique in the genre of

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the novel, when we consider that most 20th century Hindi writers were wedded to a social realism that represented the social and economic disparities and inequities of the periods in which they wrote. Earlier forms of what could be considered historical fiction, too, were more concerned with the idea of the nation and, as such presented former historical figures or mythologies (mostly Hindu) that served to bolster the idea of the nation as stretching back into the hoary mists of time. Bhīṣma Sāhnī, however, produced his novel on the partition approximately 25 years after the event. In this article I return to this novel in an effort to read it as a product of its time and theorize why Sāhnī chose the early 1970s to produce his masterpiece. I argue that *Tamas* invokes the violence of the partition as a trope to underscore what may be said to be the failure to follow through on the promise of independence 25 years earlier. The communal divisions that were exacerbated by the partition of the country in 1947 appeared to have in no way lessened in 1973. In many ways the production of a novel that revisits the violence and mayhem of the partition could be seen as an attempt to shake its readership from the inertia of the current moment and reinforce a secular humanism that could take India forward. Before I turn to an examination of this powerful text, however, it is important to highlight its unique status as a work of historical fiction, as well as literary fiction within the genre of the novel in Hindi.

Literary fiction in Hindi and representations of the past

From the age of Hindi's most-celebrated 20th-century novelist and short-story writer, Premchand (1880–1936), literary novelists in Hindi remained, for the most part, resolutely focused on representing their contemporary social world in fictional form.¹ This desire to focus on the present has been said to be a feature of the genre more

¹ For a study of the importance of the novel in Hindi as a genre that was concerned with documenting the changes taking place in India's major metropolitan centers throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries, see Dalmia 2019.

broadly.² In Hindi literary fiction, this included a focus on disenfranchised and marginalized communities, as well as an emerging sense of alienation and isolation among the middle classes in north India's rapidly expanding modern cities from the 1960. With the emergence of Dalit writers in the 1990s there was also a growing focus on the systemic exclusion of their community from mainstream society.³ From the 1990s several writers also began to explore the phenomenon of postmodernism in their novels.⁴

While social realism may be said to have dominated the literary landscape in Hindi novel fiction from the age of Premchand onwards, in this period writers also exhibited a keen desire to reproduce earlier tales in this gradually emerging genre of fiction. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries writers such as Devakīnandan Khatrī (1861–1913), began publishing novels in a mode of story-telling that could be considered similar to Romantic tales in the European tradition, and which were also indebted to the earlier tradition of *dāstāngōī* (oral story-telling) in South Asia. Influenced, like *dāstāngōī* narratives, by earlier traditions from the Arab world, their stylistically modern texts center on fictional characters belonging to royal houses who went off on adventures which included sorcery and sorcerers, shape shifting and magic.⁵

² In his thoughtful introduction to the English novel, Terry Eagleton (2005: 1–21) wrote that “[t]he novel resembles the classical epic in its consuming interest in narrative, dramatic action and the material world. It differs from it, however, in being a discourse of the present, rather than of the past. For the novel is above all a *contemporary* form as its very name suggests. ... Even the historical novel is generally a coded reflection on the present. The novel is the mythology of a civilization fascinated by its own everyday existence” (*ibid.*: 6).

³ For a comprehensive overview of the novel in Hindi, see Rāy 2002, Mīśra 2010.

⁴ For more on postmodernism and the Hindi novel, see Ghirardi 2021.

⁵ Khatrī's novels, the most famous of which was *Candrakāntā* and the series that followed this, *Candrakāntā santati*, came to be celebrated by literary historians in the 21st century who were keen to see broad consumption as a marker of the vibrancy and growth of modern Hindi as a language. For this reason, Khatrī's romantic tales came to be invoked as the first examples of truly commercial publishing in Hindi for a supposedly growing readership in Hindi around the turn of the 20th century

In the early 20th century several writers began to write what could be considered historical novels according to the definition articulated by the Marxist theorist, Georg Lukács (1885–1971) in his now-famous study of historical fiction.⁶ Many of the Hindi novels represented figures or events from India’s past that celebrated a particular historical imagining of the nation. Around the time of Premchand, writers such as Vṛndāvan Lāl Varmā (1889–1969) and Ācārya Catursen Śāstrī (1891–1960), produced a significant number of novels either about documentable historical events and figures (such as the Rānī of Jhānsī, Lakṣmībāī, in the case of Verma), Indian mythology, or events for which there was arguably less available evidence (such as the sacking the Shiva temple in Somnāth on the western coast of Gujarat by Mahmūd Ghaznavī in the 11th century C.E., in the case of Śāstrī).⁷ Epic literature in Sanskrit—in particular the *Mahābhārata* and the *Rāmāyaṇa*—also provided rich material for modern literary novels throughout the 20th century. Later authors, including Amṛtlāl Nāgar (1916–1990), wrote novels on the lives of devotional poet saints, such as the 15th-century creator of

(Orsini 2009: 198–225). Much work still remains to be done, however, when it comes to literary analysis of the texts themselves, and a determination of the relationship between texts such as these magical, romantic tales, and the genre of the historical, epic novel.

⁶ Georg Lukács, *The Historical Novel* (tr. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell) (London: Merlin Press, 1962). Lukács argued that the historical novel emerged out of the enlightenment and could be traced to the works of Sir Walter Scott (1771–1832), whom he considered the first significant exponent of this particular genre. According to this definition, the historical novel attempted to reproduce faithfully “the derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age” (*ibid.*: 19). Lukács linked the rise of this genre to the rise of the modern nation state in Europe from around the time of the French Revolution in 1789 and the Napoleonic wars soon after. In other words, Lukács understood historical fiction to be connected to a growing sense of the modern nation (*ibid.*: 25).

⁷ For more on Shastri and his literary contribution, see Mīśra 2010: 59–69. Śāstrī’s books are said to have been controversial enough for the first prime minister of independent India, Jawaharlal Nehru (purportedly a friend of the author) to attempt to have them banned for “fueling tensions between Hindus and Muslims” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acharya_Chatursen_Shastri, accessed on 9.10.2021).

the *Rāmcaritmānas*, Tulsīdās (Nāgar 1992).⁸ Later still, the prolific writer Narendra Kohli (1940–2021) produced an impressive number of novels based on the *purāṇas* and other epics.⁹ Also worthy of mention are the very popular early-21st-century Shiva trilogy and Ram Chandra series by Amish Tripathi (b. 1974), which were originally produced in English, but quickly translated into Hindi. It is clear that these works mark a significant break from earlier traditions of narrating epic Hindu stories in South Asia.¹⁰ Whether or not these may be considered ‘historical’ in the same manner as novels which fictionalize a period for which there is an accessible record, is debatable. Nevertheless, the transcreation of Hindu mythological narratives and the representation of timeless Hindu deities in a genre that is avowedly humanist in its presentation of protagonists and their inner emotional worlds, is a fascinating subject that is deserving of greater scholarly attention.

Literary fiction and the history of the Partition

History and literature converged in the middle of the 20th century with the cataclysmic events of the partition of British India into two nation states at the moment of independence in August 1947. The partition of British India into India and West and East Pakistan (along with the subsequent division of East and West Pakistan into Pakistan and Bangladesh in 1971) became the most important lens through which South Asian history came to be viewed from this moment on. Most of what has been written, in particular by academic historians in India, the US and the UK, has understood this as the greatest human and political tragedy to befall the subcontinent in its long and rich history. Very soon after these shocking events a large body of fictional literature, most notably

⁸ Amṛtlāl Nāgar, *Mānas kā haṁs* (1992 [1972], “The Swan of Manas”).

⁹ Narendra Kohli produced numerous novels on important historical or mythical Hindu figures such as Lord Rāma, Lord Kṛṣṇa, Vivekānand, and even a modern retelling of the *Mahābhārata*. See, for example, his *Rām kathā* (2012, “The Tale of Rama”).

¹⁰ There would appear to be far fewer novels, if any, that narrate the life and times of Mughal rulers or even earlier Muslim rulers of Delhi and its environs.

short stories but also some novels, was produced in the predominant literary languages (Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, and English) of the most affected region in the north-west: the Punjab. Around the 50th anniversary of independence and partition, a notable number of historians—including oral historians—and social scientists turned their attention to these literary representations in their efforts to reconsider the partition.¹¹ Many argued that while the formal historical narrative had failed to capture the human drama of partition, fictional writers had succeeded in representing the pain, trauma and loss suffered by ordinary people affected by and displaced by the cataclysmic events that preceded and followed the formal transfer of power and division of British India into two new sovereign nations: India and Pakistan (Bhalla 1999).¹² This focus on literary writers as more able to capture the emotional and physical pain of the partition continued into the 21st century.¹³

This appeal to literary fiction over formal history, which was said to be more concerned with the politics of partition and independence and the formal transfer of power, could be read as an effort to recoup a collective humanist sensibility when confronted by the horrors of the violence and displacement of millions of people in 1947. Much of the literary fiction that was produced which focused on this trauma appeared shortly after the events of 1947. A few novels, however, did appear some years after the partition. Yaśpāl, for example, produced his

¹¹ For two of the most compelling examples of this trend, see Pandey 1994 and Talbot 1995. The most celebrated example of oral history, focusing somewhat contentiously on recording the voices of women abducted during the partition was Urvarshi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India* (2000).

¹² Arguably the most important of these writers must surely be the Urdu short story writer Sa'adat Hasan Manto (1911–1955). Manto, who was born in the Punjab in what became India after independence, migrated to Lahore after the partition and lived there until his death seven years later. He came to be celebrated in scholarship in the 1990s as the partition writer *par excellence*. However, for a variety of reasons he remained relatively obscure in Pakistan until much more recently. In 2015 his life was memorialized in a film in Pakistan, and then it was also made into a feature film in India in 2018.

¹³ See, for example Jalal 2013.

now-celebrated partition novel, *Jhūṭhā sac* (“The False Truth”) over ten years after he himself moved from Lahore to Amritsar on the other side of the border.¹⁴ Historians frequently invoked Yaśpāl’s and Sāhnī’s novels in their efforts to appeal to literary fiction as a more direct and faithful description of the horrors of the events of partition. Indeed, along with the Urdu short stories of Maṅṭo, Bhīṣm Sāhnī’s novel *Tamas* (“Darkness”) has been held up more than any other work of literary fiction as the prime example of how fictional writers managed to capture in a much more nuanced and graphic manner the effects of partition, in particular when compared to historians of the period.¹⁵ The belief that *Tamas* provides the reader with an almost eye-witness account of the violence and the mayhem that unfolded in the Punjab prior to and after partition in 1947 turns on the idea that Sāhnī experienced firsthand this momentous period with his family at the age of 32, when they too migrated from the newly-created state of West Pakistan to India at the time of independence.¹⁶ By Sāhnī’s own account, he was involved in the relief work that was carried out after devastating riots broke out in the Punjab in March, 1947, just five months before partition. However, unlike other literary fiction produced about this event, *Tamas* was not written around the time of partition. In spite of this fact, scholars and historians have invoked it almost as an eye-witness account of the terrible events and the upheaval that accompanied the partition.¹⁷

Without necessarily questioning the presumed veracity of such texts as powerful accounts of the pain and trauma suffered by millions of people, it is worth considering the manner by which historians

¹⁴ The first part of Yaśpāl’s (1903–1978) celebrated novel *Jhuthā sac* (“The False Truth”) (*Vatan aur deś* [“The Homeland and the Country”]) was published in 1958, eleven years after partition, and the second part (*Deś kā bhaviṣya* [“The Future of the Country”]) in 1960.

¹⁵ For an example of these, see Talbot 1995: 37–56.

¹⁶ Alok Bhalla (1999: 3123) writes that in an interview with the author in Shimla in 1996, Sāhnī told him that he caught a train from Lahore to Amritsar on 14 August, 1947.

¹⁷ As recently as 2012 Sudha Tiwari (2012) revisited Sāhnī’s novel in this regard.

and social scientists came to consider literary works such as *Tamas* almost as documentary evidence, conflating formal history with literary fiction. The fact that this novel which, according to the author, was based on his own experiences in and around the city of Rawalpindi in March 1947, came to be written when Sāhnī was in his late fifties compels us to ask what prompted the production of this particular narrative of the tragic, violent, traumatic events in 1973?¹⁸ At least one scholar has suggested that the motivation to write the novel came from the outbreak of communal riots between Hindus and Muslims in the city of Bhiwandi, twenty km northeast of Bombay, in 1969–70 (Tiwari 2012: 670). Sāhnī, too, mentioned this motivation in his own memoir, first published in 2004.¹⁹ Indeed, to consider *Tamas* as an eye-witness account of the horrors of the partition, necessarily ignores its status as a powerful work of literary fiction. As such, the constructed nature, aesthetics and representational strategies of this text go largely unexamined in this process. Should we attempt to read this fictional representation in light of this fact, and reconsider what function it might have served in its own age, and then when it was taken up by historians and social scientists in the late 1990s and even beyond? Indeed, is it possible to analyze a work of fiction which deals with such trauma, pain and suffering as a literary text, with a particular aesthetic, and which is presumably intended to produce a certain affect in the reader? In turning to Sāhnī's novel in the final section of this article, I offer a preliminary attempt to rethink the function of a literary text that may be classified as historical fiction or fiction that invokes the past, and is said to present the reader with an almost eye-witness account of the extreme trauma, violence, suffering and loss that occurred in the process of decolonization in 1947 and the establishment of two sovereign nations, India and Pakistan.

¹⁸ In a reflection on the novel, the author (i.e. Sāhnī 2010: 392) wrote that it was based on riots that took place in and around Rawalpindi in March, 1947.

¹⁹ Interestingly, Sāhnī writes in his memoir that he completed the manuscript for *Tamas* in 1974–5 (Sāhnī 2010: 319).

***Tamas*: narrating historical trauma to reaffirm secular humanism**

The production of a work of fiction about the violent upheaval that took place in 1947, 25 years after this cataclysmic and traumatic moment in the life of the nation and in a mode which led it to be considered by historians in the 1990s as almost an “eye-witness” account of partition, marks this as a unique fictional representation in the history of the literary novel in Hindi.²⁰ While it is possible to argue that Sāhni was inspired to write this novel in the wake of communal riots in Bhiwāṇḍi in 1972, it is equally important to read this as a work of fiction, one that employs certain affective strategies and tropes in its representation of the past. As such, it is critical to reflect on the particular “pleasure” that a middle-class, educated readership would participate in through its consumption of fictional representations of such traumatic and harrowing events. It is perhaps possible to argue that the representation of this violence and inhumanity served to reaffirm a particular secular humanist imagining of the nation at a time of growing communal tension and even economic upheaval. In the final section of this essay, I will consider more closely a novel that for too long has been understood primarily as an eye-witness account of the dark days of the partition in the Punjab.

Two questions arise when we turn to the novel: why return to the calamitous events of 1947 in a work of fiction in 1973, and how are they represented in *Tamas*? In an important sense, the fact that this novel represents in fictional form events that are understood to be historically verifiable, in a manner that appears almost like an eye-witness account, is what imbues the narrative with a particular evocative power. In other words, the invocation of the traumatic events of the partition is precisely what lends *Tamas* its sense of verisimilitude. But why return

²⁰ *Tamas* has also been translated several times into English. The first of these translations was completed by J. Ratan in 1981. Bhīṣma Sāhni translated the novel himself in 2001, and then it was translated again by Daisy Rockwell in 2016. The fact that the novel has been translated on three separate occasions, as well as made into a telemovie, underscores its enduring significance in the domain of literary fiction in South Asia.

to the fictional narration of such harrowing experiences as forced conversion, murder, rape, migration, mass suicide and exile over 25 years later? I would argue that this return serves to underscore the liberal humanism of the middle-class, educated, secular reader and, in the process, provides some solace in a world that appeared to be periodically disturbed by communal violence, and which, just a few years earlier, had experienced the conflict that further divided East and West Pakistan into Bangladesh and Pakistan. By bearing witness to this violence in fictional form, the novel solicits the reader's affirmation in regard to its abhorrent nature, reinforcing the notion that such trauma should never be repeated.²¹ It is possible to argue that this points to the perception that this reaffirmation was once again necessary at the beginning of the 1970s.

This unequivocal liberal humanist sensibility is produced through a recurring focus on the senselessness of the violence and the helplessness of its victims. These include the defenseless servant Milkhi, impulsively murdered by a Muslim friend, Śāhnāvāz, of his Hindu employers when alone in their house (Śāhnī 1991: 133–138), the coldblooded stabbing of an old Muslim perfume seller in a deserted alley by a member of a Hindu youth brigade, the opportunistic abduction of the young Brahmin woman Prakāśo by her Muslim neighbor Allāh Rakkhā to forcibly make her his wife (*ibid.*: 244–248), the desperate flight of an elderly Sikh couple, Harnām Sirnh and his wife, from a village where they are the sole Sikh inhabitants (*ibid.*: 163–172), the humiliating forced conversion of their son Iqbāl Sirnh (*ibid.*: 206–210) and suicide of their daughter, Jasbīr Kaur, along with other Sikh women (*ibid.*: 218–219), and the altogether craven attack and murder of an eccentric old Sikh freedom fighter, Jarnail ('General') in the marketplace in broad daylight (*ibid.*: 145–146). In nearly all of the instances of murder, abduction and oppression that are narrated in the novel, it is underscored that the victims were isolated, weak and unable to defend themselves.

²¹ It is interesting to note that the renowned art-cinema film *Garm Havā* ("Hot Wind"), starring Śāhnī's brother, Balrāj Śāhnī, came out in 1974. This film told the story of a Muslim family in post-partition Agra and their decision to stay or migrate to the newly created state of Pakistan after partition.

It is arguably the immediate focus on the sole Dalit character in the novel's memorable first chapter, however, that immediately solicits the reader's sympathy, and as such, underscores this as a fictional text that seeks to reinforce a humanist sensibility through the act of reading. In the opening pages the novel famously narrates the leatherworker Natthū's struggles to kill a pig in a hot, stuffy room, having been commissioned by a local, influential Muslim, Murād Alī, on the pretext that the veterinarian has requested a carcass. It is reinforced that being a leatherworker, Natthū is unfamiliar with how to butcher an animal and, as such, is unsure why Murād Alī approached him in the first place. Beholden to Ali he is unable to refuse the task or the money he will receive, and struggles for the entire night in an effort to kill the boar, only to find out the next day that a pig's carcass has been found on the steps of a local mosque. While the novel leaves it deliberately ambiguous as to whether it is indeed the same pig, Natthū is consumed with guilt at the thought that he has unwittingly contributed to the incident that sparked the riot in the city.

Natthū was anxious. He sat outside his hut, smoking one pipe after another. The more he heard the rumors of the killings, the worse he felt. He told himself that he was not all-knowing. How could he have known why he was being asked to kill the pig. He would briefly feel better and then, hearing of another incident, would become anxious all over again. This is all my fault. He went over to the other leather workers, who had been sitting in front of their huts smoking since morning. He tried to tell them, but his throat would go dry and his legs would begin to shake. Should I tell my wife? She is understanding. I will get some relief if I tell her. He thought of buying a pouch of alcohol, getting drunk and forgetting about what had happened. But where would he get alcohol at this time? It is a risk to tell his wife. What would happen if she let it slip in conversation? No one will spare me. Who knows, the police could come and take me away. Then what would happen? No one will believe me Murād Alī paid me to kill the pig. Murād Alī's a Muslim. Would he have a dead pig thrown on the steps of the mosque?²²

²² "natthū pareśān thā. apnī koṭhrī ke bāhar baiṭhā vah cilam-par-cilam phūke jā rahā thā. jitnā adhik vah mār-kāṭ kī afvāhō ko suntā, utnā hī adhik uskā dil baiṭh

The reader's sympathy toward the character is evoked through this poignant description of his struggle with the pig, anxiety over his culpability in relation to the riot, as well as his apprehension about telling his wife. Behaving anxiously and erratically when he gets home, Natthū's wife interprets his manner as being sexually aroused.

"What has come over you today?" His wife said, and laughed. But she began to sense her heart yearning from his embrace. There was something which was pricking him, that was causing him to behave strangely since last night.

"You are behaving so weirdly since last night." She said. "Don't do this, you are scaring me."

"Why should we be scared. We didn't burn down anyone's house," agitated Natthū answered.

His wife's hand stopped moving on his back. But she held him tight.

Natthū's excitement and agitation gradually increased. He began to act like an insane person, just as he had the night before.

Suddenly the carcass of the pig appeared before his eyes: in the middle of the floor, its four feet in the air, and a pool of blood beneath it. He shivered. His body went cold in his wife's embrace. There was a sheen of sweat on his shoulders. His wife sensed that he had gone far away. Standing there he began to sob and then separated himself from his wife.²³

jātā. bār-bār apne man ko samjhātā, māī antarjāmī to nahī hū, mujhe kyā mālūm kis kām ke lie mujhse suar marvāyā jā rahā hai. kuch der ke lie uskā man thīkāne bhī ā jātā, lekin phir jab kisī ghaṭnā kī bāt suntā to phir becain hone lagtā. yah sab mere kiye kā phal hai. sabhī camār subah se ek-dūsre kī koṭhriyō ke bāhar bīriyā phūkte batiyā rahe the. natthū bār-bār unke bīc jā kharā hotā. vah svayam bhī batiyāne kī kośīs kartā, lekin bār-bār uskā halk sūkhne lagtā aur ṭāgē kāpne lagtī aur vah apnī koṭhri men laut ātā. kyā māī apnī patnī se sārī bāt kah dū? vah samajhdār aurat hai, merī bāt samajh jāyegī, merā dil halkā hogā. kabhī uskā man cāhtā śarāb kā pauvā kahī se mil jātā to kuch der ke lie besudh paṛā rahtā. par is vakt śarāb kahā milnevālī thī? aurat ko batānā bhī jokhim mil lenā thā. bātō-bātō mē usne kisī se kah diyā to? phir kyā hogā? mujhe koī choregā nahī. kyā mālūm pulis hī mujhe pakarkar le jāye? phir kyā hogā? merī bāt kaun mānegā ki murād alī ke kahne par māine aisā kām kiyā hai? murād alī musalmān hai, kyā vah maṣjid ke sāmne suar phīkvāne kā kām karegā?" (*ibid.*: 155).

²³ "«āj tujhe kyā ho gayā hai?» uskī strī ne kahā aur hās dī. par pati ke āliṅgānō mē uske dil kī chaṭpaṭaṭā kā bhās milne lagā. koī bāt hai jo iske dil mē kāṭe kī tarah

This poignant description of Natthū's state appears designed to evoke a sympathy in the reader toward this marginalized and exploited community.²⁴ The valorization of this single Dalit character as the innocent victim of devious machinations by the political classes, determined to sow the seeds of division between the religious communities, reinforces the idea that communal violence is instigated by political elites, sweeping up the uneducated classes, for their own political gain. When the reader is informed in passing approximately one hundred pages later in the final few pages of the novel, with no elaboration, that Natthū is dead, this further reinforces the notion that the lives of the exploited and oppressed are too easily erased from history. Towards the end of the novel, after order had been re-established in the city and the British officials (the Deputy Commissioner and Health Officer) begin to assess the loss of life and destruction of property, the decision is taken to have all of the leaders of the various political organizations tour the city together in a bus to appeal for peace and communal harmony. The narrator describes the arrival of the bus, with slogans blaring from a loudspeaker, to take these leaders throughout the city.

chubhī hai, jisse yah kal rāt se ajīb-sā vyavahār kar rahā hai.

«kal rāt se tum kaise behke behke se har bāt kar rahe ho!» usne kahā, «aisā nahī karo jī, mujhe dar lagtā hai».

«hamē kyō dar lagegā, hamne to kisī kā ghar nahī jalālyā hai!» natthū na atpātā-sā uttar diyā.

uskī pīth par patnī kā hāth ruk gayā, par vah Natthū ko apnī bāhō mē liye rahī.

natthū kī uttejnā aur kṣobh, donō hī, uttarottar baṛhte jā rahe the, vah pāgalō kī tarh vaise hī vyavahār karne lagā jaise kal rāt karne lagā thā.

uskī ākhō ke sāmne sahsā suar kī lās ghūm gayī. farś ke bīcobīc, cārō ṭāgē ūpar ko thī huī, aur nīce khūn kā tāl-sā. aur vah sihar uṭhā. patnī kī bāhō mē natthū kā śarīr jaise ṭhaṇḍā paṛne lagā. uske kandhō par pasīne kī parat ā gayī aur uskī patnī ko lagā jaise uskā man bhāṭakkar phir kahī dūr calā gayā hai. khaṛe khaṛe natthū ke mūh se siskī sī nikal gayī aur apnī patnī se alag ho gayā” (*ibid.*: 158).

²⁴ This is not the only example of the representation of a Dalit character in Hindi fiction before the rise of Dalit fiction in Hindi in the 1990s. The most famous example is Premchand's representation of the character Sūrdās, in his early-20th-century novel, *Raṅgbhūmi*. This novel became the subject of intense debate in the late 1990s precisely on account of this representation. For more on this debate, see Brueck 2014.

“May Hindus and Muslims be one!”

“Long live Hindu-Muslim unity!”

“Long live the Peace Committee!”

The people peered inside the bus. Who was already sitting inside raising these slogans over the loudspeaker? Someone was sitting next to the driver, holding the microphone. Most, but not all, couldn't recognize him. Natthū was already dead. If he were present, though, it wouldn't have taken him long to recognize him. It was Murād Alī. With his dark complexion and pointy moustache, his thin cane between his legs and his small eyes darting left and right, Murād Alī was yelling out these slogans over the loudspeaker.²⁵

This trope of the weak and vulnerable becoming victims to violence enacted by those more powerful, epitomized by its treatment of the sole Dalit character, is arguably the most distinctive trope of *Tamas*. Equally striking, however, its treatment of the solitary English couple, the Deputy Commissioner Richard and his despondent and idle wife Lisa. In addition to Natthū and his wife, whose relationship approximates modern companionable marriage, Richard and Lisa also recur throughout the novel. They first appear in an early chapter, reappear when the riot begins to engulf the city, and then return at the end of the novel, musing on the end of Richard's post for his failure to stop the violence, as well as the imminent demise of the British Raj in India. The novel takes an unusually generous stance toward these two characters. Richard is described as less of an administrator and more of

²⁵ “«hindū-muslim – ek ho!»

«hindū-muslim ittahād – jindābād!»

«aman kameṭī – jindābād!»

logō ne jhāk-jhāk bas ke āndar dekhā, kaun ādmī thā jo pahle se bas mē baiṭhkar āyā thā aur lāuḍspīkar par nāre lagā rahā thā. draivar kī sīt ke sāthvālī sīt par ek ādmī hāth mē māikrofon pakṛe baiṭhā thā. bahut logō ne use nahī pahcānā. kuchek ne pahcān bhī liyā. natthū mar cukā thā, varnā natthū yahā maujūd hotā to use pahcānne mē der nahī lagtī. murād alī thā. kale cehre aur kaṭlī mūchōvālā murād alī, uskī patlī-sī chaṛī uskī ṭāḡō ke bīc paṛī thī aur choṭī-choṭī ākhē dāyē-bāyē dekhe jā rahī thī aur lāuḍspīkar mē se nāre gūj rahe the” (*ibid.*: 258).

a dilettante, passionately interested in the archeology and history of South Asia. Lisa is portrayed as rather desperate for the affection of her bookish and aloof husband, as well as completely overwhelmed by the subcontinent, unable and, for the most part, uninterested in actually learning about it. It is also mentioned that this is her second trip to India, the first having ended unceremoniously with what is suggested was a breakdown and her return to England. Try as they might to overcome it, their relationship is characterized as unromantic and, as such, profoundly depressing. This portrayal is infused with a particular sense of despondency and inevitability, regardless of the efforts of both Richard and Lisa to overcome this state. Lisa attempts to feign interest in Richard's passion for archeological digs and their treasures, and Richard is mindful of how isolated and alienated his wife feels. Their awkward exchanges continue throughout the novel as the situation in the city grows more tense and finally erupts in the riot. Compelled to deal with this situation, in particular the delegations of political leaders seeking his intervention, Lisa's inevitable isolation results in her taking solace in alcohol.

The nuanced and evocative portrayal of the relationship between the Deputy Commissioner and his wife is just one example of the complexity of a novel that goes beyond merely functioning to bear witness to the horrors of the partition. This is borne out further by two scenes toward the end of the novel. In one of these, Richard returns home to find his wife passed out on the sofa, having consumed almost a bottle of beer and having wet herself. Saddened by her condition, he lifts her up in his arms and carries her to her bed (*ibid.*: 229–230). Then, in the final pages of the novel, the couple muse over their future in the light of Richard's failure to prevent the riot. In this, too, Richard's desire to stay on in his post but acceptance that his transfer is now inevitable, is met with secret joy on the part of his wife. The reader is not given a sense that this is the point at which the Raj will ultimately crumble, which could be interpreted as pointing to the communal violence not presaging a more momentous historical fissure, but as a depressingly recurring trope. When pressed further by his wife about wishing

to stay on and to continue his study of India's ancient civilizations, Richard's responds with resignation, a resignation that may be said to infuse the novel's overall affect in regard to communal tensions more generally in South Asia.

Conclusion

In re-presenting these traumatic, transgressive moments, *Tamas* asks its reader to empathize with those who are portrayed as experiencing the darkness of communal unrest. In doing so, the reader becomes compelled to imagine their own response to such mayhem and carnage, and suspicion and doubts about one's fellow denizens, particularly on the basis of their religious affiliation. It suggests that in spite of the notion of a shared, syncretic culture, one that boasts remarkable achievements in the arts, architecture and literature, in such moments of unbridled violence, suspicion of those who profess another religious belief comes to overshadow the logic of a shared existence. It is in the act of imagining not succumbing to this temptation that the reader may reaffirm a commitment to secular humanism.

Ultimately, should we consider the darkness that gives the novel its title simply the darkness of this tumult, when all semblance of civil order collapsed and individuals and groups became capable of committing horrendous, egregious acts of inhumanity toward their fellow citizens on the basis of their religious identity? It is indeed possible to argue that the novel functions to shed light on this darkness, and in the process reinforce a particular secular humanist sensibility among its readership. For this reason, the novel invites us to understand that in addition to the machinations of the political classes, the darkness of *Tamas* could also be correlated with religion and the role that it played in the violence, killing and displacement of whole populations. Indeed, it is possible to argue that the title, *Tamas* ("Darkness") is employed ironically when we consider that the major religions in South Asia have, for centuries, been understood as concerned with *prakāś* ('light'). The novel could be said to underscore the responsibility of religion in the tragedy of the partition,

as represented time and again throughout the narrative by its focus on cowardly acts committed by individuals against vulnerable members of another religion. It may also be read as a response on the part of the educated classes to the emergence of Hindu nationalism in India from the 1970s. Thus, while the novel may be said to have provided an eye-witness account of the suffering, pain and oppression of millions of people in 1947, it may also have sought to shed light on a religious identitarianism that was growing steadily more evident from the early 1970s onward. While historians in the 1990s invoked this and other novels and short stories for their seeming ability to reveal the human drama of the historical events of the partition, through its sensitive and sympathetic characterization, *Tamas* also produced a rearticulation of a secular humanism that may have appeared to be in danger of being overshadowed from the early 1970s. For this reason, *Tamas* is deserving of a much closer reading for the manner in which it contributes to a literature of trauma, the complexities of its narrative and its complex characterization, its unique status as a historical novel, as well as for its unadorned style designed to produce its affective eye-witness quality. It is hoped that this essay will inspire further close analysis of this novel in order to approach the darkness that lies at the heart of *Tamas*.

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